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Merging Language and Content through Multidimensional Curriculum Design

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Multidimensional Curriculum Design: Purpose and Principles

The students at Miyazaki International College (MIC) are a heterogeneous group who bring a variety of skills and talents to the learning environment. Among these qualities are an eagerness to learn in a non-traditional environment, high academic skills and a wide range of proficiency levels on the English language learning continuum. Designing curriculum and selecting appropriate teaching strategies for this clientele constitute challenges of no small proportions for MIC's faculty members. Students are asked to develop their English language skills almost entirely through the content courses; at the same time, they are required to explore those disciplines through the medium of the English language.

Because of the uniqueness of the team-taught integrated courses at MIC (i.e. both content and language instructors planning and delivering the course together), models for curriculum design for content- and discipline-based language learning which have been developed elsewhere are insufficient for dealing with the various challenges. Existing models have been designed for one instructor who delivers only the language component of an adjunct or sheltered course (see: Short, 1991; Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989; Krueger & Ryan, 1993) while the content is delivered by a discipline specialist in a class offered at a different time. In order for the classroom instruction to be truly integrated, the curriculum must be designed in such a way that the sequencing of the daily lesson plans can incorporate the multiple objectives without artificially separating the teaching of the content and language instructors.

Our application of the Multidimensional Curriculum Design (hereafter, MCD) has proven to be very useful. This commentary introduces the basic components of MCD, and displays how we have used it to conceptualize and organize one module in an integrated, team-taught course called "Sociology and Environmental Issues".

First conceived by H. H. Stern (1983), and currently being implemented in educational institutions across Canada by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (see: CMLR, 1990 and Sotiriadis, 1995), the multidimensional curriculum grew out of a perceived need to move away from the situational/structural language syllabus which had been prevalent in the early 1980s, and which focussed on the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar within the context of everyday situations (e.g. Leblanc, 1990). In this kind of syllabus, the organizing principle centered on the priority of the linguistic form of language. In contrast, the multidimensional curriculum is organized around four dimensions: (1) communicative-experiential, (2) language, (3) culture, and (4) general education (for a full discussion see: CMLR, 1990).

In applying Stern's model to courses at MIC, we have been guided by his four dimensions of learning—experiential, culture, language, and general education. In order to adapt his model to fit the unique MIC situation, we have changed Stern's "culture" dimension to "content". The meaning of each dimension is outlined below:

1. **experiential dimension:** this dimension provides themes and topics from the students' own experience. A student's prior experience is further broadened

with new content and experiences during the course. Each course module has an overall experiential goal which gives meaning and context to all activities in the module; this goal can be likened to an outcome which requires the students to consolidate their learning to accomplish the goal.

2. **content dimension:** this dimension contains the objectives for the content related to the general course objectives and description. At MIC, the academic content is liberal arts, composed of social science and humanities courses.
3. **language dimension:** the language objectives coexist with the content objectives. The specific language content contained in this dimension is determined by the nature of the experiential goals. The teaching and learning of all language content is done in context according to the needs of the communicative situation and experiential goal.
4. **general education:** the goal of this dimension is to facilitate reflections on learning in general and on developing awareness of how to transfer learning to new situations. Since making connections is an important part of critical thinking, this dimension emphasizes activities which help to activate, to consolidate and to personalize the individual student's own learning.

The overarching principle in the MCD is that the experiential goal(s) must determine the rest of the elements of the module. This goal reflects real-life situations in that students use their knowledge and skills to communicate in authentic ways. Quite different from a typical university course syllabus driven by a list of topics, the content of a multidimensional unit flows from the experiential goals. Once these are decided, the instructors then decide what topics, teaching strategies, language and so forth are needed by students to accomplish the experiential goal.

To illustrate the multidimensional curriculum design, we display how we applied it to preview the experiential, language, content, and general education objectives of one module from a course entitled "Sociology and Environmental Issues". This is a first-year course which was codeveloped and cotaught by David Rehorick (content faculty) and Sally Rehorick (language faculty) at Miyazaki International College. We worked with Japanese EFL students whose approximate TOEFL levels ranged from 340 to 450.

Illustrating the Design: Module 3 from "Sociology and Environmental Issues"

The theme of "environment" is central to the MIC program; thus many environmental courses are available in both the humanities and social science streams within the four-year curriculum. Our course on "Sociology and Environmental Issues" was conceived as three cumulative, analytical parts: Module 1—Self and Environment: Multiple Perspectives; Module 2—Environmental Health Issues: Personal and Social Responses; and Module 3—Environment as a Source of Fear: Human Response to Natural Disasters.

The integrative tissue of these modules is threefold: (1) that all classes are experientially-based, (2) that ideas develop progressively from the concrete and particular to the abstract and general (for example from me to them, near to far, real to ideal), and (3) that central social science concepts are recycled, and intellectually expanded as the course unfolds. In addition, the course moves from micro to macro-levels of analysis both within and between course modules. With respect to the latter, the course recycles and extends students' understanding and application of key concepts such as "perspectives". In Module 1, we introduce the concept of "perspectives" and develop the students' ability of "seeing" multiple perspectives on a single issue. In Module 2, critical skill-building extends the students' ability to "take"

multiple perspectives on an issue. Finally, Module 3, emphasizes how to "analyze and evaluate" varied perspectives on a dramatic event and to take an informed stance in light of ideas and information processed.

To illustrate the specifics of the multidimensional curriculum design, we present, below, a generic outline of categories that one might use in applying the MCD. This is followed by our application of the categories to our unit on natural disasters in the external environment (Module 3). For brevity of presentation, we have highlighted **multidimensional curriculum design categories** in bold font; categories related to the course unit are presented in plain text.

**Environment as a Source of Fear:
Human Response to Natural Disasters
(a five-week module)**

1. THEME:

Environment as a Source of Fear:
Human Response to Natural Disasters

2. FIELD OF EXPERIENCE:

Experiencing Earthquakes:
Individual and Social Perceptions

3. TOPIC DESCRIPTORS:

Natural Disasters, Earthquakes, Tremors, Newspaper Reports,
Individual Experiences, Scientific Explanations, Social Responses

4. EXPERIENTIAL GOAL:

Write an essay which addresses the following question: Who has ultimate responsibility for restoration after the Great Hanshin Earthquake: the individual/family unit; the local community; the national government?

5. TEACHING FOCI AND STRATEGIES:

Group learning	Whole-class	Individual-based
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think-Pair-Share • Jigsaw • Graffiti • Circles of Knowledge • Peer conferencing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15-minute summary lectures by the instructors • Brainstorming • Randomly selected reports to the class by the students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process writing of an essay • Portfolio management

6. TOPICS TO BE DEVELOPED:

Individual Experiences of Earthquakes/Tremors
Newspaper Reports of the Great Hanshin Earthquake: International and Japanese
Japanese Views of the Disaster: Continuing Stories and Commentaries

7. SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

Descriptions of personal experience of earthquakes
Immediate personal response to Great Hanshin Earthquake 1995
Comparison of experiences with team members
Canadian newspaper articles—first month after Hanshin Earthquake
Japanese English-language newspaper articles—then and continuing

8. UNIT ASSESSMENT:

- In-class observations of pair and group work
- Individual portfolios demonstrating process writing
- Final essay

9. EXPERIENTIAL/COMMUNICATIVE OBJECTIVES:

- Compare and contrast (oral and written) lived experiences of tremors with other people
- Compare and contrast written perspectives from inside and outside Japan
- Articulate one's own experience relative to newspaper reports

10. CONTENT OBJECTIVES:

- Understand the impact of media in shaping one's perceptions
- Examine how faith in authority, e.g. scientists, influences our lives
- Take an informed position after critically examining information from multiple sources

11. LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES:

- Use a process writing approach
- Skim read for key information
- Summarize orally for another student essential information from one's own specific article
- Use appropriate connectors, such as "likewise", "while", "in contrast", "similarly", etc.
- Use present verb tenses to express what happens generally, and past tenses to narrate events

12. TEACHING NOTES FOR TOPIC DEVELOPMENT:

- Individual experiences of earthquakes/tremors: kinds of questions to pose
- Newspaper reports: International and Japanese: describing the event and destruction, explaining the social consequences, questions about blame, and loss of public faith
- Japanese views of the disaster: continuing stories and commentaries, what's being discussed now

The selection of earthquakes as the theme and topic for our final module was purposive, and tied to the integrative tissue linking all course units. Given the relative recency of the Great Hanshin Earthquake (January 1995), this particular type of natural disaster was grounded in our students' personal experience. Some students had friends or relatives living in the Kobe area at the onset of the Hanshin Earthquake. Everyone was deeply moved by the event and closely followed the media and newspaper coverage. As well, everyone has had direct experience of tremor activity since Japan is located on a major world fault-zone. In addition, David Rehorick, anticipating the potential utility of this topic while still teaching in Canada, collected and brought extensive Canadian and international newspaper clippings which reported on the Hanshin Earthquake. This provided students with a rich external resource to compare to Japanese English-language newspaper reports and views of the same event. The latter were collected and organized by David and Sally Rehorick after they arrived in Japan.

The unit design above does not include the sequencing of the various components of the unit over the course of the five weeks. The structure and sequence of each class is the next step once the overall design has been set.

Final Thoughts

The unique integrated teaching partnership for first and second-year courses at the Miyazaki International College provides a special opportunity for pedagogical experimentation and research. Over a four-year period, many language and content teaching teams have been formed. Very few faculty have both the experience and educational requirements to solo-teach language and content components. As well, the cross-cultural mix of international and Japanese faculty adds a rich dimension to the search for effective ways to merge content with language. In this commentary, we have shown how a Multidimensional Curriculum Design can be used to help language and content specialists integrate their course objectives in holistic terms so that the aims of both teaching partners are explicit and mutually supportive. An essential ingredient for integrative partnerships at MIC is for both instructors to see clearly the context-of-the-whole before becoming embedded in the delivery of everyday classroom work.

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